

An Initial Plan for West Newton:

Options for Preserving and Enhancing a Sense of Place



West Newton Planning Study
11.360 Community Growth and Land Use Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report applies the general values articulated in *A Framework for Newton's Planning* to the village of West Newton. It marks the culmination of a semester's work by nine students in the Community Growth and Land Use Planning workshop, a course offered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Urban Studies and Planning. The reports summarize the findings presented by the students at two public meetings in Newton during the course of the semester.

Despite its many assets, Newton faces significant challenges as it enters the 21st Century. New development pressures and a legacy of automobile-oriented growth make preserving and reinforcing the city's physical character a pressing concern for future planning efforts. Recognizing these challenges, Mayor David Cohen entrusted a newly-appointed Framework Planning Committee with the task of identifying "consensus values for a planning framework" to guide more detailed studies in the future. The resulting Framework provides guidelines for future planning processes in specific communities. The village of West Newton presents one of the first opportunities to apply the framework to a community that

has much in common with the rest of Newton but is also distinguished by its unique qualities.

While most residents are generally happy with the village, West Newton now must turn to challenges that range from short-term considerations—such as traffic, parking and streetscape issues—to the more long-term goal of guiding and managing future development. By carefully considering the village's options for the future, West Newton can preserve and reinforce its many good qualities while ensuring a vibrant and diverse business district for future generations.

Through a series of analyses and proposals, the project team sought to offer new ideas and stimulate debate on guiding the future of the West Newton village center. The team first documented the natural and physical features of the village center, including an analysis of West Newton's built environment, current zoning, natural assets, transportation and parking. From this analysis of existing conditions, the team then identified the current opportunities and constraints of the village center, noting aspects of the village that should be either enhanced or preserved.

Proposals

Based on its analysis, the project team developed a three-part strategy for suggested improvements. The first part consists of short-term, small-scale improvements to the village center. The second part identifies long-term redevelopment opportunities to ensure that future development is compatible with the West Newton context and both preserves and reinforces the character of the village center. The third part highlights regulatory tools, such as zoning techniques and design controls, which can help shape growth in the manner that West Newton residents prefer.

Short-term Improvements

In its proposals for short-term strategies, the project team emphasized opportunities for enhancing the village character and establishing a more pronounced sense of place in the village center. Specific proposals offered by the project team include:

- Establishing consistent and pedestrian-friendly streetscape design using carefully selected street furniture, traffic calming techniques and the enhancement of

pedestrian crossings

- Enhancing existing parks and natural assets, such as Captain John Ryan Memorial Park and the Cheesecake Brook, through creative landscape design
- Introducing appropriate signage for purposes such as demarcating the village center and identifying parking locations.

Long-term Alternatives and Strategies

Given the robust nature of the Boston area real estate market in recent years and the overall appeal of Newton, it is reasonable to expect that some new development will occur in West Newton in the future. Recognizing this potential, the project team looked at ways to guide and manage this growth. In order to do so, it highlighted parcels that are either underutilized or sensitive to development pressure in the future. In particular, the team concentrated on redevelopment opportunities for two categories of parcels: three parcels owned by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority that are particularly susceptible to change as well as potential “gateway sites” located at key focal points for travelers entering the village.

The project team offers site-specific proposals for two locations at the edges of the village center. One site, the largest of the three Turnpike-owned parcels, is isolated from West Newton by the I-90 off-ramp and sits adjacent to the commuter rail line. The site is currently used as informal commuter parking. In recent years, the Turnpike Authority has expressed interest in developing the site and is likely to revisit this development opportunity in the near future. One possible future option would be to maintain the current use of the site. A second, and possibly short-term, option would be to upgrade access to the site and to the commuter rail while formalizing the provision of parking on the parcel. The project team’s long-term proposal suggests development that covers roughly half of the site and stands no more than six stories tall. Both options emphasize establishing a link with the village center while improving connections between the parcel and the commuter rail platform. The proposals also emphasize context-sensitive development and mitigating the traffic impact on surrounding neighborhoods.

The project team also developed proposals for what it calls the “East Gateway,”

a collection of thirteen parcels on the eastern end of the West Newton study area. The site was chosen as an example of the potential positive and negative effects that could result from parcel assembly and redevelopment on the fringes of the West Newton business district. Any or all of these alternatives to the by-right option illustrate opportunities for redevelopment of this strategic site that are consistent with the spirit of the Framework values and related principles set out by the project team. Options for the East gateway include mixed-use buildings, housing and parkland that reclaims a portion of the Cheesecake Brook. The report describes each of three alternatives in detail.

Proposed Regulatory Framework

The lack of any village-specific standards, while not inherently harmful, does leave the door open for development that is incompatible with the village character in terms of use, scale, or design. It also creates some barriers by mandating parking and setback standards that are more appropriate to residential neighborhoods or highway strip development than to a village center. To address these

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

concerns, the project team suggests the application of village-specific land use regulation, which could function as a zoning designation specific to West Newton, as a more generic citywide ‘village center’ zoning designation, or as a design overlay. In addition, the team proposes the review and revision of permitted uses within the village center by encouraging those that are more compatible with the village character. Tools to achieve the desired outcome could include:

- In-lieu parking fees
- Enhanced site plan review
- Design review
- Transitional zones
- Vertical zoning

Next Steps

The report concludes with a series of implementation steps for bringing the short-term and long-term goals to fruition. A plan for preserving and reinforcing the village center is only as strong as the institutional capacity to carry that plan forward and implement the recommendations. The project team’s suggestions for implementation consist of next steps such as:

- Work to both empower the West Newton Advisory Committee and create a West Newton Business Association to address issues and advocate for a stronger village character.
- Initiate a more structured volunteer core for village streetscape and park improvements.
- Consider exploring the possibility of using CDBG funds for streetscape, signage and park improvements proposed in this document.
- Review the tools and strategies developed by the popular National Main Street Program and implemented in the City of Boston.
- Enact a multi-agency advisory committee for assessing and improving streetscape and parks.
- Work with the Turnpike Authority to develop an agreement on short-term commuter parking provisions and a Memorandum of Understanding to guide development on the west Turnpike parcel.

- Develop a relationship with landowners of underutilized parcels and work with them to promote parcel assembly and context-sensitive development.

- Partner with the MBTA to assist with improved access to the commuter rail station.

With the continued support of the Mayor and the planning department, the tireless advocacy of the Board of Aldermen and an expanded role for the local community and business interests, it is possible for West Newton to achieve its full potential.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This planning report would not have taken shape without the leadership, mentorship, continued support and unfaltering vision of our course instructor, Professor Terry Szold. The West Newton project team hereby express our deepest gratitude to Terry for nourishing us with bite-size planning wisdom and late-night Chinese food. We also thank Kath Phelan, our resourceful TA, for her behind-the-scenes efforts in helping us keep entropy at bay.

The team would like to duly thank Mayor David Cohen and Planning Director Michael Kruse for giving us the opportunity to work in West Newton. We are grateful to Michael and staffer Nancy Radzevich for having made so many trips down to our lair during times both optimistic and apprehensive. The team also thanks Philip Herr, the former instructor and Newton guru, for taking his time to review our presentation material and providing us with valuable feedback.

This report also marks the embodiment of various encounters and discoveries -- both planned and unplanned -- with West Newton residents and business owners.

We would like to specifically thank the following individuals for their valuable input: Aldermen Rick Lipof and Lenny Gentile; Michael Leviton of Lumiere; and Elizabeth Sternberg, Newton's Housing Development Coordinator.

A special token of appreciation goes to the crew at Ben's Coffeehouse for making us feel "at home" despite our lengthy take-overs.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Preface

This report marks the culmination of a semester's work by nine students in the Community Growth and Land Use Planning workshop, a course offered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Urban Studies and Planning. The course is designed to familiarize students in the Master of City Planning program with the techniques, processes, and personal and professional skills required to effectively manage growth and land use change. In addition to providing students with a set of fundamental skills and tools for growth management and land use planning, the course offers students the opportunity to undertake a planning project for an actual client.

The client for this year's course, the City of Newton Mayor's Office and the Department of Planning and Community Development, asked the student project team to apply the general values articulated in *A Framework for Newton's Planning* to the village of West Newton. This report summarizes the findings presented by the students to city officials and local residents in two public meetings during the course of the semester. These findings include

an analysis of existing conditions in and around West Newton's village center as well as site-specific proposals for future planning activities in the area. This work complements that of two other groups of students from the class: a similar study of the Village of Newton Centre and an analysis of Newton's permitting process.

Background

Once part of Watertown and subsequently Cambridge during the first half of the 17th Century, the City of Newton has since evolved from rural township to small mill-town to its current incarnation as a suburban city of 83,000 people. Located six miles from downtown Boston, Newton is not simply a suburb of Boston but also a city with an identity and character unto itself. The city's history is reflected in its architecture and walkable streets, while its nickname "The Garden City" references its open space and tree-lined roads. At the same time, the city is comprised of thirteen distinct villages, each with their own unique qualities.

Despite its many assets, Newton faces significant challenges as it enters the twenty-first century. New development pressures and a legacy of automobile-oriented growth make preserving and reinforcing the city's physical character a pressing concern for future planning efforts. Moreover, the metropolitan area's economic boom of the past decade has resulted in an increasing cost of living that jeopardizes the city's ability to house its younger generations and continue to

attract a diversity of residents.

Recognizing these challenges, in late 1998 Mayor David Cohen entrusted a newly appointed Framework Planning Committee with the task of identifying "consensus values for a planning framework" to guide more detailed studies in the future. The resulting Framework constitutes "an important step towards preparation of the comprehensive plan for the City" and the first attempt since 1979 to address planning in a comprehensive manner across all thirteen villages of Newton.

The city now turns to the task of translating the values articulated by the framework into plans for specific communities. The Village of West Newton, one of the first to receive such attention, presents the opportunity to apply the Framework to a community that has much in common with the rest of Newton but is also distinguished by its unique qualities. Located in the northwest corner of Newton, the village is one of the city's most diverse communities and one of three Newton villages that qualify to receive Community Development Block Grant funds. While its development originally reflected the growth of

the Boston and Albany Railroad, West Newton is now a visible stop along both the MBTA commuter rail line and the Massachusetts Turnpike. The Turnpike separates the village center from the West Newton Hill neighborhood.

While most residents are generally happy with the village, West Newton will face new challenges in coming years. These challenges range from short-term considerations, such as traffic, parking and streetscape issues, to the more long-term goal of guiding and managing future development. By carefully considering the village's options for the future, West Newton can preserve and reinforce its many good qualities while ensuring a vibrant and diverse business district for future generations.

CHAPTER 2: ANALYSIS OF EXISTING CONDITIONS

I. Methodology

In order to collect information for this study, the project team visited West Newton many times between September 2001 to December 2001. The team's methodology for studying the area consisted of the following activities:

- **Analysis of Existing Conditions and Visual Documentation:** The project team analyzed existing conditions by observing the area and taking photographs.
- **Parcel Analysis:** This phase included a more detailed analysis of individual parcels in the study area. Through observation and use of the City of Newton's online assessor's database, the team documented such characteristics as building typologies, the exterior conditions of each structure, floor area ratio (FAR) and parcel ownership.
- **Interviews:** The project team interviewed local residents, business owners and members of the Board of Aldermen working in or representing West Newton.
- **Zoning Analysis:** The project team ana-

lyzed current zoning in the study area and compared zoning designations to actual land use.

- **Parking Study:** On Thursday, November 8 and Saturday, November 10, the team conducted a parking survey, which documented current parking demand, distribution and turnover in the vicinity of the village center.

In addition to these methods, the project team consulted a variety of background materials, including those provided by the course instructor and client.



II. Study Area

Given time constraints, the project team chose to focus its efforts on the village center. However, the study area for this report extends slightly further than the village center itself, so as to include edges and transitions between uses. The boundaries of the study area are illustrated above.

The village center is concentrated along

Washington Street from its intersection with Dunstan Street to shortly before it crosses I-90. Offices, small retail shops, restaurants, the West Newton Cinema and a cluster of civic uses, which consists of a police building and a district court, occupy the core of the village center. There is a small, self-contained industrial area to the west of the center along Border Street, which serves as an unusual buffer between residential neighborhoods and the village center. Border Street is

home to auto-repair, landscaping, and plumbing businesses, among others. East of the village center, Washington Street abruptly changes character and becomes an auto-dominated highway strip lined with businesses such as car sales and rental, auto body shops and gas stations. A ring of single- and multi-family housing surrounds the village center on all sides, except for the eastern edge of Washington Street and to the south (I-90).

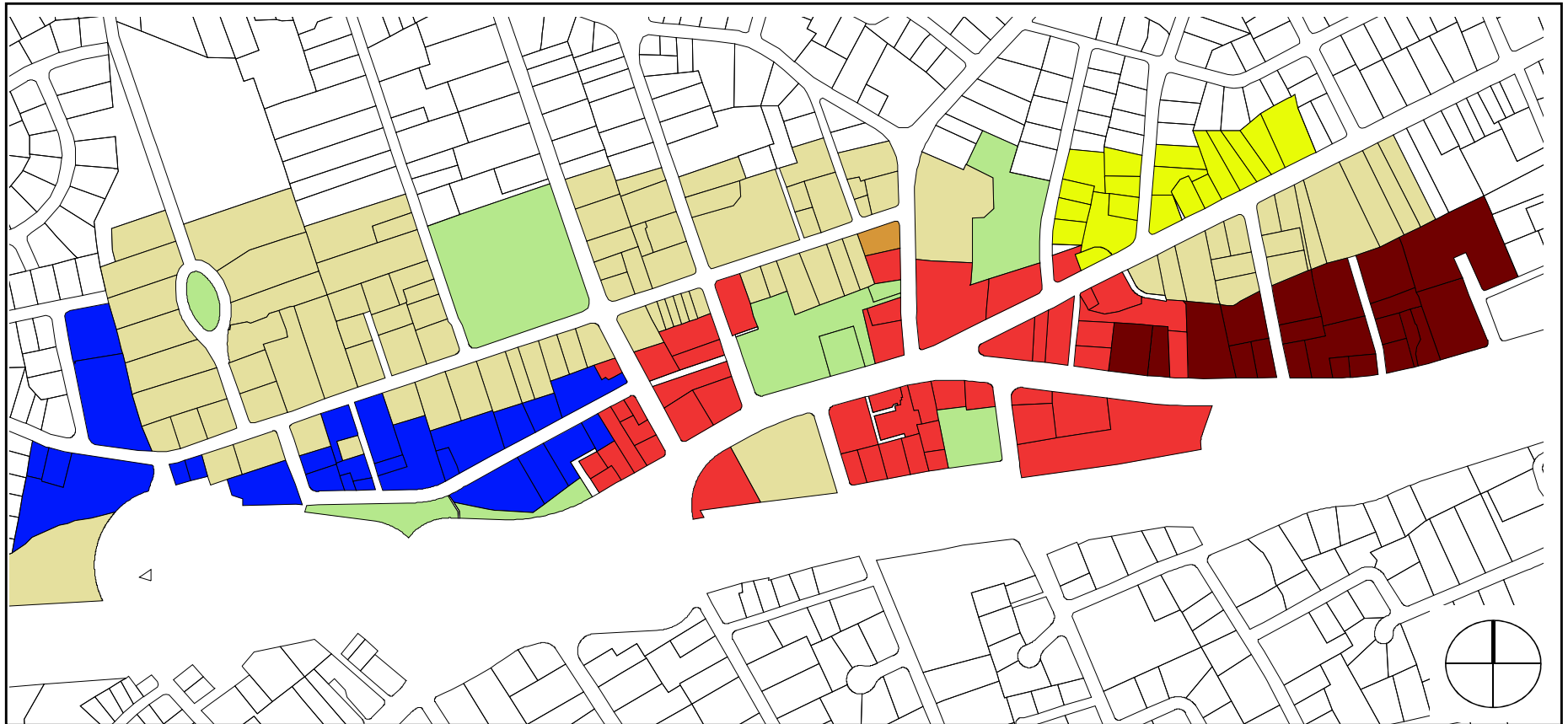
III. Housing and Demographics

The predominant style of housing in West Newton, as in most of the City, is the single family home. Nonetheless, some two- to four-family homes are present just beyond the study area. In addition, several townhouse style developments have been newly erected or refurbished in the surrounding neighborhood.

With the homeowner and rental vacancy rates dipping to 0.5% and 2.1% respectively, Newton's desirability is evident. The result has been skyrocketing housing costs citywide. This affordability problem, which has become one of the City's principal problems, impacts a range of income levels. Housing costs, averaging \$300,000- \$600,000 in West Newton, are beyond the reach of most moderate-income families. This problem seriously threatens the diversity that Newton desires to preserve.

While detailed 2000 Census data for West Newton was not available at the time of publication, some citywide trends are noteworthy. There has been a substantial decrease in the number of young adults in the community, particularly those of

age 20 to 24 (-28.6% change) and age 25 to 34 (-20.6% change). In contrast, there has been a substantial increase in residents 45 to 54 (+48.5%), 55 to 59 (+23.5%) and 85+ (+28.9%). While the predominant race is still overwhelmingly white (88.1% of the total population), there is a noteworthy increase in residents who identify as asian (+72.4%). The most significant increase in absolute numbers is among residents of Chinese ancestry. While we do not have specific figures, there is anecdotal evidence that this trend is noticeable in West Newton.



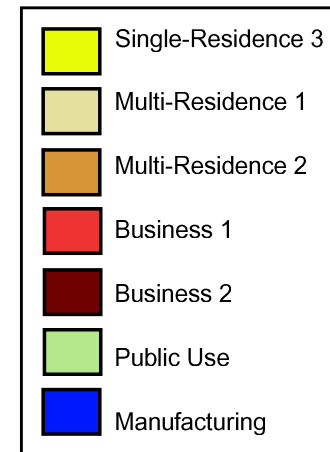
IV. Zoning and Land Use

Zoning is a tool to guide land uses in order to protect the health, safety and welfare of the community. A city's zoning code sets out a framework for acceptable development either by stating all allowable forms of development and prohibiting unauthorized uses, or by stating prohibited forms of development and allowing all other uses.

Seven different zoning designations

appear within the bounds of the study area. These include Business 1, Business 2, Manufacturing, Public Use, Multi-Residence 1, Multi-Residence 2, and Single-Residence 3. This assortment of zoning designations appears to be applied in a rather arbitrary, patchwork fashion; however, comparison with a land use map reveals a close match between zoning and land use.

The close relationship between the zoning



WEST NEWTON ZONING MAP



LAND USE MAP

- Residential
- Non-Profit
- Parking
- Business
- Open Space
- Public Use
- Manufacturing

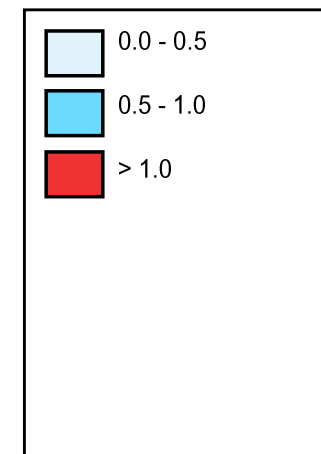
and land use maps could suggest either a singularly successful zoning code or one that merely transcribes existing uses into law. The patchwork nature of the zoning map suggests that, in West Newton, land use is guiding zoning, rather than the reverse. This assumption is reinforced by the lack of standards specific to village centers in the zoning code. The same regulations apply within village centers as outside them. Thus, not only does the zoning code fail to provide a uniform stan-

dard in the village center; it also fails to address the village center at all.



Floor-area-ratio (FAR) is the ratio of the total square footage of a building to the size of its lot. An FAR of 1 indicates that the gross floor area and the lot size are the same, such that a single floor could cover the entire lot, two floors could sit on one-half of the lot, three floors could sit on one-third of the lot, and so on. Typically, the higher the FAR, the denser the city fabric tends to be. In West Newton, the maximum allowable FAR for most parcels is 1. The actual FAR ranges from 0.08 to

1.79. Those parcels above 1.0 were most likely built out before the FAR concept was applied to the area, or allowed by special permit. The majority of parcels, however, have a FAR below that allowed as-of-right. This means that additional development could occur on most parcels in the village center, if market conditions allowed.



FLOOR -
AREA -
RATIO

V. Natural Assets

Newton is known as “The Garden City” due to its abundance of natural assets. These natural assets include topographical variation in landscape, which creates delightful drops and rises along its terrain and sets the scene for innovative uses of slopes in building construction. There are also plentiful water resources such as Cheesecake Brook, Dolan Pond, and groundwater that underlie these surface features. In addition, an impressive array of horticultural specimens, most notable among them oak, maple, acacia, linden, and elm, are scattered throughout West Newton, visibly thickening as one enters the residential areas to the north.

The cumulative effect of these natural assets in West Newton enhances landscape aesthetics. Perhaps more importantly, they safeguard the livelihood of insects, birds, and small mammals that depend on them and allow for a sustainable ecosystem within the region. Environmental sensibility and efforts toward environmental sustainability must be integrated into the planning process in order to effectively preserve and promote current assets. Environmental awareness will

also provide a setting for social interaction, sharing, and a sense of community.

A thorough understanding and appreciation of the inherent characteristics of West Newton’s landscape is indispensable when considering site-specific, appropriate land use planning. Of particular significance are:

- Physiology
- Waterways
- Landforms
- Vegetation

For this reason, Appendix A: Natural Assets and Physiology explores these natural assets in greater detail.

VI. Transportation

Most people reach West Newton by car. As in many areas, traffic becomes congested during peak commuting hours. During non-peak hours, traffic flows smoothly through the district. Washington Street and Watertown Street, both segments of Route 16, serve as the main arteries in West Newton. Washington Street, which passes through the commercial district, is 85 feet wide with two lanes of traffic in each direction and parallel parking on both sides. Watertown Street, though primarily residential, also serves as a busy thoroughfare to and from the village center.

Although I-90 creates a barrier between West Newton's commercial center and the West Newton Hill residential area, it connects West Newton to surrounding areas via the exit located within the district. Having the exit is beneficial to the neighborhood but has the unfortunate effect of generating additional traffic, both on the main streets and residential streets that are used to access the highway.

In order to improve traffic flow, the following may be considered. Improvements

in signage could assist drivers in negotiating the many restricted left turns along Washington Street. In addition, extending the median along Washington Street may help eliminate the illegal U-turns that routinely occur. This would have the added benefit of assisting pedestrians when crossing the street.

Public Transit

MBTA Commuter Rail. The Worcester/Framingham commuter rail line has a stop at West Newton. The MBTA runs 10 trains daily with headways between 15 and 45 minutes during rush hour and 90 minutes or more during off-peak times. Approximately 400 passengers travel inbound from this stop every weekday. An average of 140 passengers uses this station on Saturday and Sunday combined. It is worth noting that trains coming from Boston do not stop in West Newton during the morning peak, making it impossible for people to reverse commute to West Newton via commuter rail. This might become an issue if a major business moved to the area.

MBTA Bus Service. The MBTA operates three bus routes that travel through West

Newton. Two local routes, #553 and #554, stop in front of the police station en route from Roberts (Brandeis) and Waverly Square respectively to downtown Boston. The third route is an express bus route travelling from Waltham to downtown Boston. The stop in West Newton is located at St. Bernard's Church at 1515 Washington Street on the southern side of I-90. Many people use the church parking lot as an informal park-and-ride facility. The express bus does not stop in the commercial district.

Nexus Route 3. The City of Newton operates Nexus, a public bus service. Nexus Route 3 follows a circular route through northern Newton and stops in West Newton. Service is hourly from 9.00 AM to 5.00 PM. The bus travels from Auburndale down Cherry Street, turning left onto Washington Street at the Police Station. It then turns left onto Watertown Street heading to Newton North High School in Newtonville. The Nexus buses are rarely at capacity.

VII. Parking Analysis

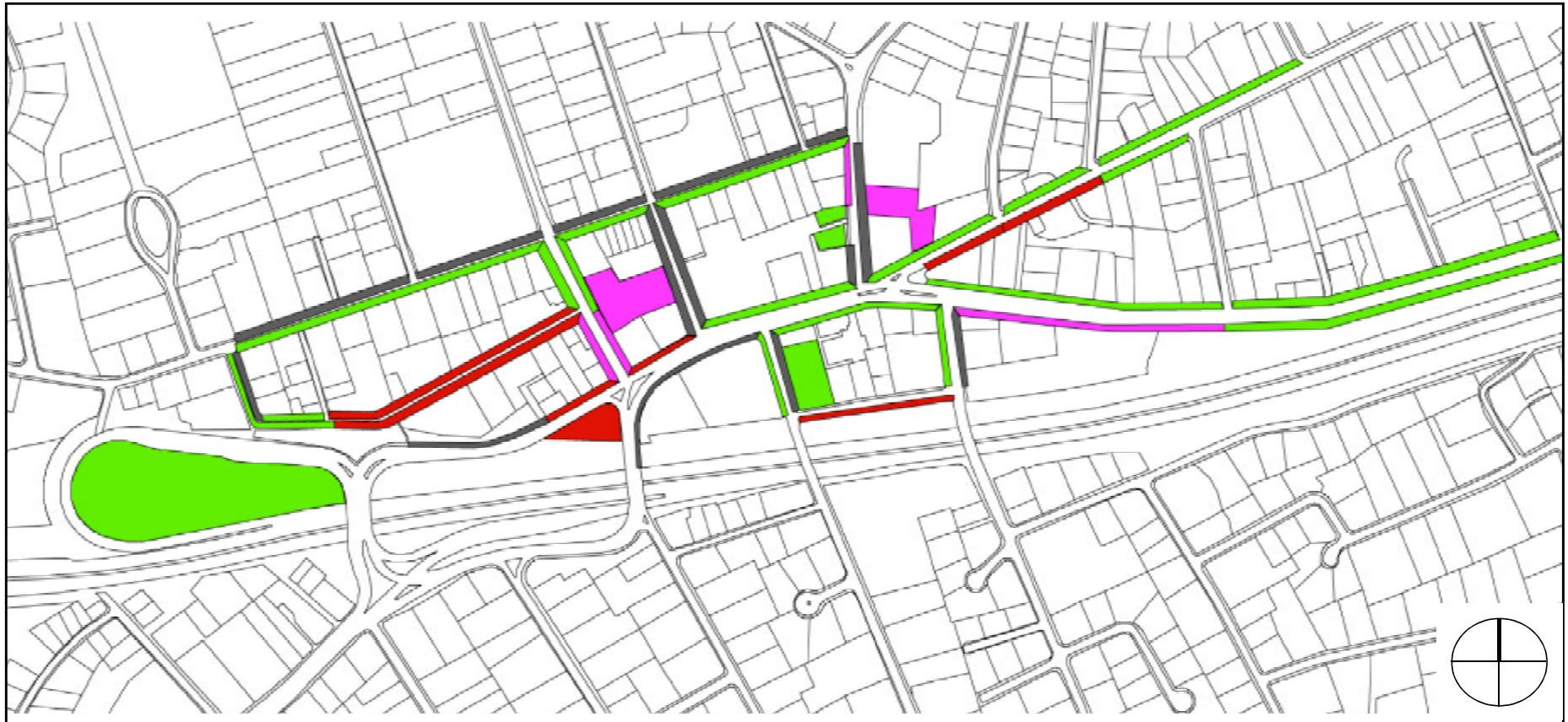
A survey of parking demand in West Newton on Thursday, November 8 and Saturday, November 10 provided some valuable insight into parking demand and distribution. Various streets and parking lots were checked at four times throughout the day to record how many spaces were filled. Some areas were investigated more closely to see if cars remained parked for long periods of time. Results from this parking study can be found in Appendix B: Parking Capacity and Appendix C: Parking Turnover.

The parking study concluded that West Newton has sufficient parking to meet the needs of the current businesses in the village center. The amount of people parking in a given location fluctuates depending on the time of day. The municipal lots located north of Washington Street seem to be underutilized compared to on-street parking. This may be due to poor signage or the fact that people prefer to park closer to their destination.

Weekdays

During work days, commuters using the rail station generally park in three locations: Davis Street, the west Turnpike parcel within the I-90 off-ramp (see Chapter 4, Section III) and the Turnpike parcel between Putnam Street and Washington Street across from the Blue Ribbon Bar-B-Q. Neither of the Turnpike parcels is officially designated for parking. Two-thirds of the spaces in the lot between Putnam and Washington were filled during three of the four parking checks. The southern side of Washington Street between Chestnut and Dunstan Streets appeared to be used for long term parking as well. Sixteen of the 27 spaces were filled in both the morning and at mid-day.

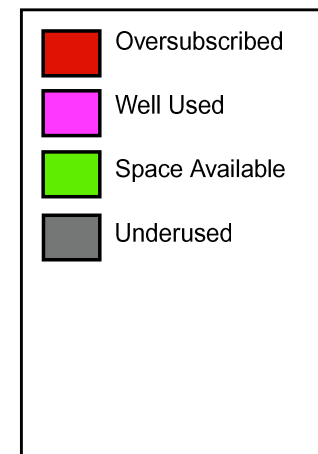
Border Street was also filled with parked cars throughout the day, with many cars parked in unofficial parking spaces. Border Street has many curb cuts, which reduce the number of legal spaces. The parking lot connected with the CVS building and the public parking lot between Cherry and Elm were both well used but never full during the day. It was observed that people not visiting businesses in the CVS building use this space. From the



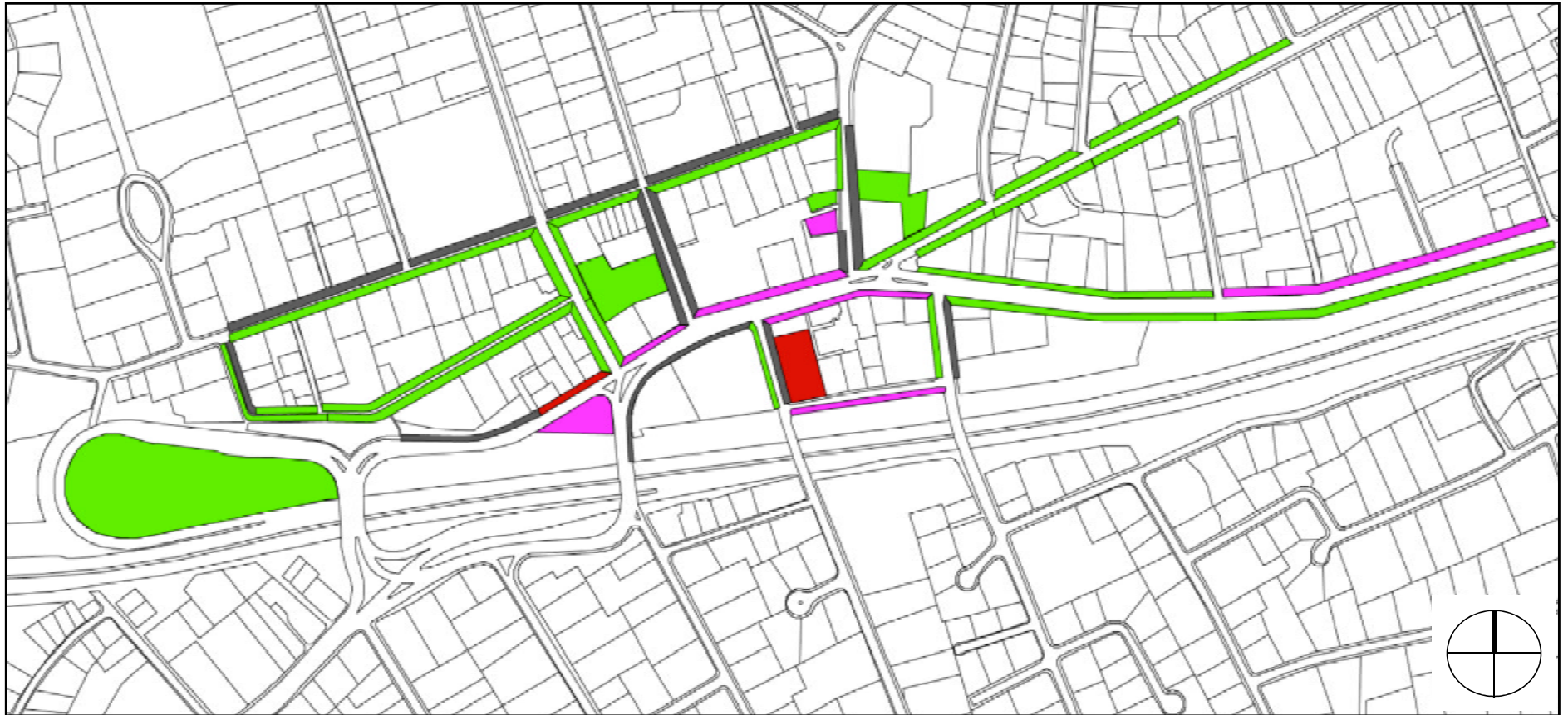
team's observations, it did not appear that this prevented building patrons from finding parking. The lot connected with the Sovereign Bank is highly underutilized during the day. The parking lot was less than 25% full during both daytime checks.

Parking seems to be slightly more problematic at lunch than during the rest of the day although there was still parking to be found. At lunchtime only, Elm Street had more parked cars than legal spaces.

It is assumed that people park here to run short errands on Washington Street during this time. Washington Street from Cherry Street westward was a popular place to park, as was the southern side of Watertown Street from Davis Court westward. Given the width of the road, it may be possible to extend parking farther west on Washington Street, where no parking is currently permitted.



PARKING ANALYSIS: WEEKDAY



PARKING ANALYSIS: WEEKEND & EVENING

- Oversubscribed
- Well Used
- Space Available
- Underused

Weekend/Weeknight

Parking patterns are similar in the evenings, both on weekdays and during the weekend. Street parking is concentrated on Washington Street from Chestnut Street westward. Off-street parking is focused in the Sovereign Bank parking lot and the private lot behind the post office on Waltham Street. The Sovereign Bank lot was 75-100% full during the weekend compared to 25% during banking hours.

It is assumed theatergoers use the bank parking lot when the bank is closed. The lot across from Blue Ribbon Bar-B-Q restaurant was well used during the evenings and weekends. During these times, there was a much greater turnover of vehicles than during the weekday. The Bar-B-Q lot would better serve the community if it were dedicated to short term parking, both on weekends and during the week. Turning this into a municipal lot with 1-2hr parking limits would increase the number

of people able to find spaces close to their errands and dining opportunities. Commuters currently using this space could be directed to the west Turnpike parcel.

VIII. Architectural Typology

City fabric is defined as urban solids and voids arranged to form continuous patterns of blocks and spaces. The urban solids of the fabric develop in accordance with voids of circulation and open space as well as the result of development related to use. Consequently, an architectural type is formed through the process of reducing a complexity of formal variants to a common root. These individual buildings or types are to the continuous space of a city as letters are to a sentence or word. Thus, each element or building is subordinate to a larger whole, the fabric of West Newton.

The fabric of West Newton can be described as semi-dense, somewhere between a dense area such as Brookline and a lower density typical of outer suburbs. Comprising this fabric is a collection of buildings that represent a range of architectural typologies. In the village center along Washington Street, the struc-

tures define a consistent street edge of primarily one-story structures, with the exception of the 3-story CVS building, Ben's Coffeehouse and the Boston Sports Club. These structures house commercial and retail uses, which in most cases engage the pedestrian environment by means of transparent storefront, a façade treatment typical of main-street retail development.

Along with commercial and retail building types in the village center, civic building types dominate the center of the village. They include the Sovereign Bank building, the First Unitarian Church, the Newton Police Headquarters and the District Court building. In addition to the four existing civic buildings, Newton's city hall once stood on the current location of Captain John Ryan Park. While these structures stand apart from those that line the street edges to either side, they reflect the history of the village center, and in terms of scale and material, symbolically represent the City of Newton as a strong and stable community.



Newton Police Headquarters



Typical Storefront



Distinctive red brick building housing CVS, Store 24, and offices.

IX. Landmarks, Activity Generators and Edges

One way to analyze a place is in terms of its landmarks, activity generators and edges. Landmarks provide a point of reference to those who pass through or live in an area of the city. Landmarks are usually defined as physical objects: buildings, signs, bridges or trees. They frequently serve as visual clues that shape an individual's mental image of a place and are increasingly relied upon as a journey becomes more and more familiar or as a means of familiarizing others with a particular place. In West Newton, the most prominent landmark is the Cinema, well-known in the neighborhood and community. Moreover, the civic structures at the center of the village-church, courthouse, bank, police station- as well as the historic buildings housing CVS and Ben's Coffeehouse are prominent in both scale and location, shaping one's orientation in the village.

Activity generators are simply those locations where many people come and go on a daily basis or congregate at some specific time. This element of analysis has much to do with the type of use occur-

ring at a particular time in this location. These locations are sometimes prominent as generators of activity because they are also landmarks. As noted above, the Cinema serves as the most prominent generator of activity according to the individuals in the community, along with restaurants such as the Blue Ribbon Bar-B-Q. The CVS and Ben's Coffeehouse are also busy locations, along with the new Dunkin Donuts coffee shop.

Edges are linear elements that are not used or considered as means of travel for individuals in the community. They serve as the boundaries between two phases or linear breaks in continuity, such as a shoreline, wall, or the edge of development or a particular use. They may be barriers that are penetrable, but close one region off from another; or they may be seams that join related regions with one another. In West Newton, there are four main edges of different types. The most obvious edge is the commuter rail and I-90 Interstate to the south. Although it is easy to cross by vehicle, this edge presents a clear separation between the village center and the residential area to the south. The transitional zones of parking behind the buildings along Wash-



ington Street create a penetrable boundary between the village center and the residential area to the north. As the core of the village center begins to transition to different uses in the east and west, an indefinable edge is formed. This lack of definition to the village center makes it difficult to know when one has entered or left the village.



Landmarks



Activity Generator



District Edges

URBAN DESIGN ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 3: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

I. A Framework for Newton's Planning

A. Core Values

The next phase of analysis was structured around the core values articulated in *A Framework for Newton's Planning*:

- A City of Diverse Neighborhoods and Villages
- A Diversity of Residents
- A Garden City
- The Pursuit of Excellence
- An Uncompromising Commitment to Educational Achievement
- A Sharing Community
- Responsible Membership in Larger Communities
- Stable Residential Neighborhoods
- Adherence to Core Values Over Time

Of the nine core values, four proved particularly instructive:

- A City of Diverse Neighborhoods and Villages: Maintain the unique identity of West Newton while ensuring that it ties in socially and physically with the entire City
- A Diversity of Residents: Welcome a rich diversity of race, ethnicity, national origin,

religion and economic status among the residents of West Newton in contrast to the stereotype of homogenous suburbs.

- A "Garden City": Ensure West Newton contributes to the "Garden City" image that Newton values.

- Stable Residential Neighborhoods: Maintain the West Newton neighborhood character in the face of pressures for major land use change, buildings of a disruptive scale, or undesirable impacts.

B. Village Character

Central to Newton's vision is the preservation and promotion of its thirteen unique villages. To better understand how residents of Newton define village character, the project team drew directly from the language of the Framework. Key elements include:

- Pedestrian access and walkability
- Consistency in the physical character of buildings
- Preservation and maintenance of historic cultural resources
- Facilities and institutions that provide a social and functional focus for neighbor-

hood or village coherence and exchange

- Local businesses
- Preservation and maintenance of open space, including open space corridors and reserves linking and buffering the villages
- Residential/retail mixed uses, including multi-family and rental housing
- Compact development in village center that minimizes business district sprawl
- Reconciliation of means of access and parking consistent with the spatial needs of a village center pattern, including ample commuter parking
- Adequate signage
- Integrated transitional strategies: building height limitations, intensity of use restrictions, clustering, open space, buffering
- Appropriate scale, design, impact, and context.

II. Opportunities and Constraints

With the core values in mind, the project team identified a number of opportunities and constraints within the study area, some of which have been alluded to in the earlier analysis. Opportunities encompass key elements of the district that contribute to the special qualities of West Newton's village center. Constraints include aspects of the district which, at best, impede West Newton's ability to further enhance these qualities or, at worse, threaten to undermine the desired village character.

A. Business District

West Newton has maintained what is becoming increasingly rare in other places; that is, an effective mix of small businesses-many of them independently and/or locally owned. Preservation of this local, small-scale character is highly valued. Thus, the consolidation of several smaller scale storefronts and offices in the two-story structure at 1357-1369 Washington Street for a single use, namely the Boston Sports Club, has been met with much consternation. Overall, the existing mix of businesses appears to satisfy local residents' convenience shopping needs.

Nonetheless, there are indications that additional businesses, such as a bookstore, ice cream shop or hardware store, would be welcome.

The district also benefits from the entertainment niche that creates a fair amount of activity in the evenings and on week-ends. Anchored by the West Newton Cinema, a number of well-renowned restaurants have also emerged in recent years, including Lumiere and the Blue Ribbon Bar-B-Q. These establishments draw patrons from throughout the City of Newton and beyond.



West Newton Cinema



Ben's Coffeeshouse



Blue Ribbon Bar-B-Q



Commuter rail platform



Architectural detailing from the nineteenth century



First Unitarian Church

B. Built Environment

The introduction of the railroad depot in the early 1800s along the Boston and Albany railroad line heralded the development of West Newton's commercial district. Despite the dominance of automobiles in today's society, the commuter rail line still figures prominently in the district, carrying approximately 400 riders daily from West Newton into Boston. Many historic structures dating back to these early beginnings still exist providing some of the more intricate architectural detailing in the village center. And despite the development pressure in recent times, the built environment still retains its human scale.

C. Greenspace and Open Space

Street trees line most of the village center sidewalks. The Captain John Ryan Memorial Park, a target of CDBG funds, is a favored lunch spot during the warm weather months. The expansive lawn of the First Unitarian Church is well manicured, nicely complementing the park across the street. A small plaza with benches and concrete planters is located in front of Ben's Coffeehouse. The Cheesecake Brook, which runs east-to-west through the study area, is largely hidden under the municipal parking lots. However, a portion of it to the east of the village center could be rediscovered, providing another attractive natural amenity in the district. In addition, Dolan Pond conservation area, though not very well known, is but a five-minute walk from the village center. Several playing fields and parks can also be found just beyond the study area. While natural assets are abundant in West Newton, a strong commitment to their preservation, maintenance, and in some cases improvement, will ensure that they continue to enhance the district rather than detract from it.



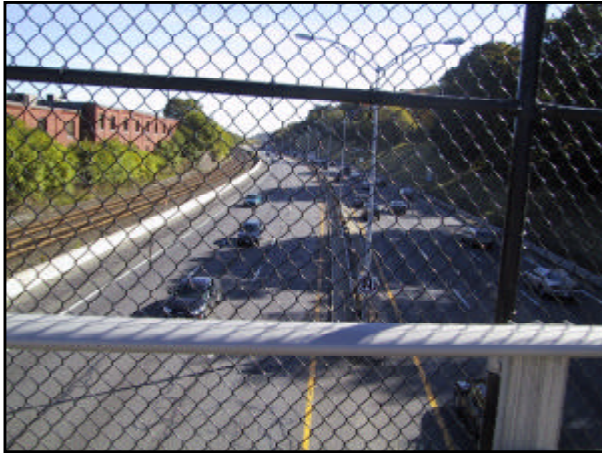
Cheesecake Brook



Small plaza in front of Ben's Coffeehouse



Captain John Ryan Memorial Park



View of Mass Pike from Chestnut Street



Washington Street towards the center of the district



Median along Washington Street

D. Auto-Dominated Environment

Ideally, streets do not function simply as thoroughfares but also as distinct places themselves. Unfortunately, the current auto-oriented design of Washington and Watertown Streets falls short of achieving this place-making function. Heavy traffic on Washington and Watertown Streets, coupled with an insufficient number of crosswalks, makes pedestrian crossings difficult. As illustrated in the accompanying photo of Washington Street, the median (as well as some of the street islands) tends to accentuate the highway environment of some locations. In addition, the traffic median is not long enough to prevent the illegal U-turns it is presumably designed to address. Even the street lamps on Washington Street are oriented to automobiles: rather than lower-hung lamp posts tailored to pedestrians, the lights hang high over the street and illuminate cars, not people. This automobile dominance is further reinforced by the presence of the Massachusetts Turnpike, which divides West Newton Hill from the remainder of the village.

E. Streetscape

As the Framework notes, “real places are made up of elements that are interrelated, contributing to a comprehensible whole through some form of coherence, whether of space, design, function, social ties, or ideally all of those.” Unfortunately, the existing streetscape in West Newton does not foster the desired coherence. The village currently lacks a cohesive architectural language or organization. While single-story structures predominate, there are also two and three story buildings sprinkled throughout the area. Several different building typologies exist. No single building material predominates: brick, stone, concrete and wood structures are all present.

Likewise, varied sidewalk treatments are found throughout the area. Brickwork exists in some locations, whereas concrete, in various states of repair, exists in others. Moreover, the street furniture ranges in style, quality and appeal. For instance, handsome wood benches line certain areas of the district, while uncomfortable concrete benches are located

near the cinema. In addition, the public realm is not uniformly maintained and several elements have deteriorated over time.

Finally, a cluster of civic buildings divides the business district into two distinct sections, further undermining this sense of cohesion. The architectural features and historic significance of these buildings are, no doubt, positive attributes. Nonetheless, they do serve as a psychological barrier to walking down Washington Street, particularly in the evening.



Small plaza in front of CVS



Traffic Island at Washington and Watertown



Intersection of Washington and Watertown



Entering West Newton from the West



Exiting towards the West



Entering West Newton from the East

F. Sense of Place

While undoubtedly taken for granted by long-term residents, it is quite difficult, upon first visit to West Newton, to determine where the village actually begins. Certainly, the Massachusetts Turnpike establishes a very distinct edge to the south of the village center. Similarly, although not nearly so dramatically, Webster Street demarcates the transition to the adjacent residential neighborhood to the north. However, when travelling from the east or the west, which most visitors do, it is very difficult to discern when one has arrived in the village center.

Very small signs mark the gateways. However, these are easily overlooked due to their size and the lack of corresponding environmental cues. In particular, the low-density, auto-oriented uses along Washington Street sprawl eastward from the village center without any clear transition. This distinction is made only more difficult by the fact that the width of Washington Street is out of scale with the height of the buildings along its edges.

CHAPTER 4: ALTERNATIVES AND STRATEGIES

The project team's initial analysis revealed, essentially, that the West Newton village center is fairly healthy. Local residents and shopkeepers interviewed for this study indicated that they particularly value West Newton's convenience, suburban character and its lack of pretension. However, keeping in mind the opportunities and constraints identified in Chapter 3, the project team developed a three-part strategy for suggested improvements. The first part is one of short-term, small-scale improvements to the village center. The second part consists of long-term redevelopment strategies to ensure that future development is compatible with the West Newton context and both preserves and reinforces the character of the village center. The third part highlights regulatory tools, such as zoning techniques and design controls, which can help shape growth in the manner that West Newton residents prefer.

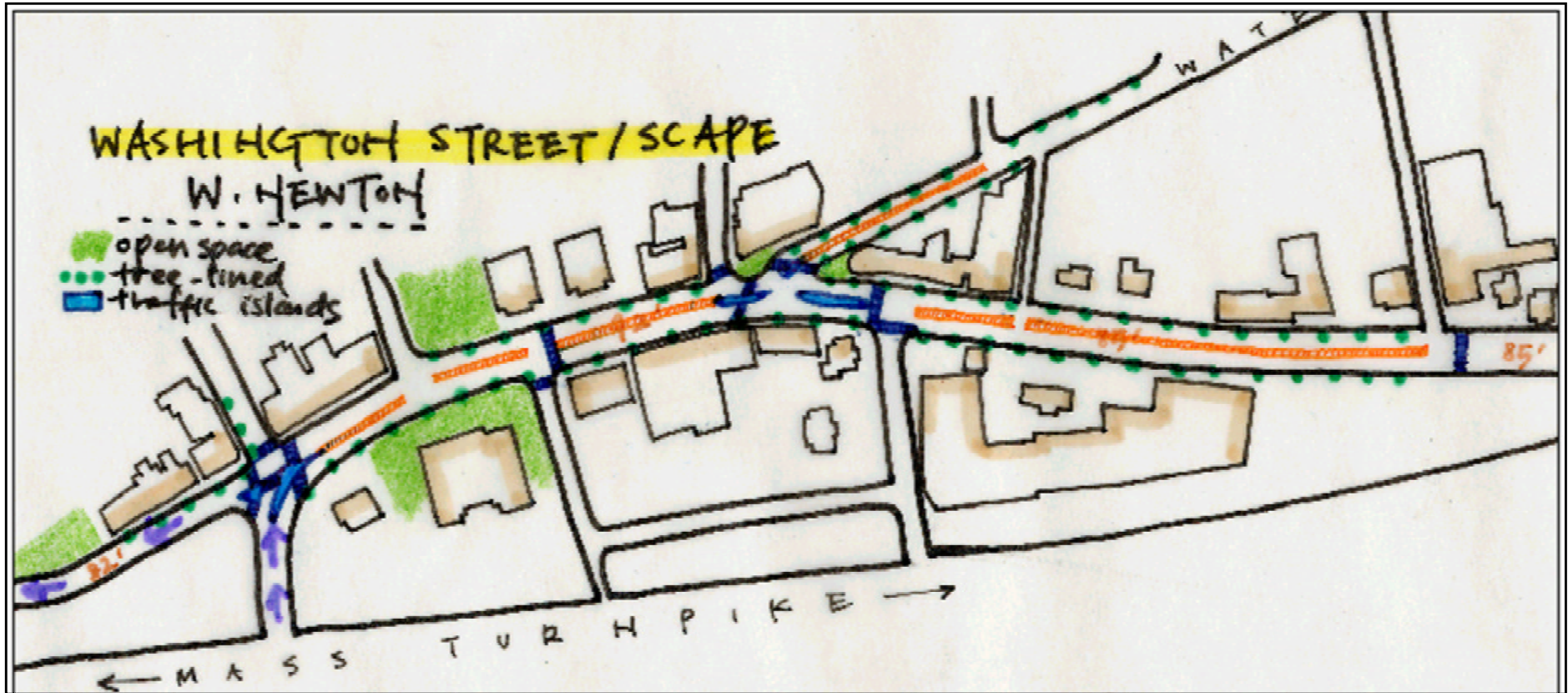
I. Short-term Strategies: Streetscape Enhancement

The physical form of any built environment evolves over time. The manner in which it evolves is dictated by land use regulations working on various jurisdictional

scales, more immediately evident on local and regional scales but also indirectly on the national level. Buildings, streets, sidewalks, bridges, and other physical structures inevitably deteriorate over time, and therefore require constant maintenance and redesign. Zoning and other land use regulations define and limit the ways new construction can take form, and thus play a powerful role in shaping the cities and streets of tomorrow.

The project team's assessment of West Newton revealed a wealth of physical assets that contribute to the values identified in the Framework, such as supporting "a sharing community" and sustaining "a Garden City". While creating its plan for the physical form of West Newton into the future, the project team focused primarily on two themes: promoting the existing village character, and further enhancing a sense of place in West Newton. The physical designs suggested here stem from infrastructure and natural assets already in place in West Newton. Through a focused effort to bring existing parts into a cohesive whole, various stakeholders in West Newton - including residents, Aldermen, members of the Planning Board of Newton and civil organizations such as the West

Newton Advisory Committee - could choose to implement any number of alternative strategies outlined below. Again, it is worth emphasizing that any change in physical form evolves over time, and must be guided by a sound regulatory framework and coherent vision of the future.



A. Creating a More Pedestrian-Friendly Environment

The existing streetscape of Washington Street, the main axis of West Newton's village center, currently offers limited pedestrian amenities. As noted in Chapter 2, pedestrian movement remains concentrated near specific activity-generating landmarks, such as the West Newton Cinema and various restaurant venues, and rarely spills over to other areas of the

village center. Instead of walking along Washington Street to get to one part of the village center from another, people seem to prefer driving to the next destination. The following factors may contribute to limited pedestrian movement:

1. The cluster of civic buildings that effectively divides the village center into two discontinuous sections;
2. Infrequent crossing signals and insuf-

ficient street lighting at night, that evokes a sense of insecurity in pedestrians;

3. The high traffic volume and large width (85 feet) of Washington Street, which overwhelms the pedestrian and paves the way for automobile dominance; or

4. The absence of a municipal parking structure or lot that lies near the center of the village, and offers roughly equidistant accessibility to destinations within the village center.

The simplest way to improve streetscape conditions for pedestrians on Washington Street would be to install enticing street furniture, such as benches and street lamps. Benches currently do exist along Washington Street, albeit in irregular intervals and sometimes in unappealing forms. As an example, the concrete benches located near the Cinema offer uncomfortable sedentary experiences to pedestrians, especially in the colder months. More stylish and comfortable wooden benches can be found elsewhere in the village center. More widespread use of the wooden benches would contribute significantly to pedestrian comfort and streetscape consistency.

Existing street lamps along Washington Street do not offer adequate lighting at night and present a safety hazard to pedestrians. The lights tower many feet above the human head and curve over to the street to presumably illuminate the way for automobiles. The style and frequency of lamps remain the same throughout the business district and outside of it, showing a passive disregard for the distinctiveness of the village center. Installing a dramatically different lighting scheme throughout the length of the village center - starting from the westernmost block of Washington Street and ending near Dunstan Street to the east - would accentuate the special character of the village center. It would also help send out a message to pedestrians and drivers alike that they have reached a destination. Street lamps best contribute to a sense of place if positioned in close proximity to each other so as to produce a “string-of-lights” effect when approached from afar. Low hanging lamps with wrought-iron embellishments would be optimal for aesthetic purposes.

Another way to ensure a pedestrian-friendly environment along Washington Street would be to install more crossing signals and crosswalks. The crosswalks



Distinctive pavings add to pedestrian safety



could achieve both functionality and aesthetic value if made with a building material of contrasting color and texture. Though embedding brick along a crosswalk would produce a traffic-calming effect and offer an appealing contrast to conventional asphalt and concrete pavement, installation and maintenance costs may be prohibitive. Technological advancements now allow for brick-like molds to be impressed upon red cement-like material, thereby producing the same

visual and functional effect as bricks, with increased durability and lower cost.

To address the problem of automobile dominance, the final and perhaps most visible solution would be to install continuous strips of traffic islands along Washington Street. (see above) The traffic islands would extend westward to the intersection of Elm Street and eastward to Dunstan Street, broken only at the mouths of streets feeding into Washington

Street. They would help reduce the scale of Washington Street to human size without necessarily reducing the number of traffic lanes. The islands could also provide refuge for pedestrians who wish to cross safely, and prevent drivers from taking illegal U-turns. Traffic islands, moreover, could serve as greenspace amenities if planted with ample vegetation. For safety concerns, traffic islands are best planted with hardy, ground-hugging shrubs or lawn grass, combined with medium-to-low stature trees planted, reasonably spaced to ensure visibility of the pedestrians and drivers. Tall or ill-maintained shrubs could obscure pedestrians -especially children -from the view of drivers, and may prove dangerous.

B. Consistency in Streetscape

Creating a consistent streetscape includes elements of the built environment, such as building density, height, setbacks, storefront requirements (number and frequency of doorways, for example), and other architectural elements, which are dictated by the zoning ordinance. Consistency

of streetscape is therefore a long-term endeavor; it must withstand the city's evolution through planning. Other more short-term street embellishments, such as installment of street lamps, street trees, various street furniture and sidewalk design, however, could also generate streetscape consistency. Sufficient street lamps could be placed in proximity to one another to produce a string of lights that embroider the sidewalks on either side of the street. Lush and resolute street trees could produce arboreal alleyways that offer protection from the sun, noise, and traffic pollution, and create yet another layer of linked chains along the street. Sidewalk material and design could be integrated to establish continuity along the street, thereby giving it more definition and eloquence. Consistency could also be fostered by encouraging more cooperation amongst storeowners along Washington Street in defining maintenance responsibilities in the private and public domain, installing common landscaping elements such as planters and flower beds, and setting standards for storefront signage.

C. Greenspace Enhancements

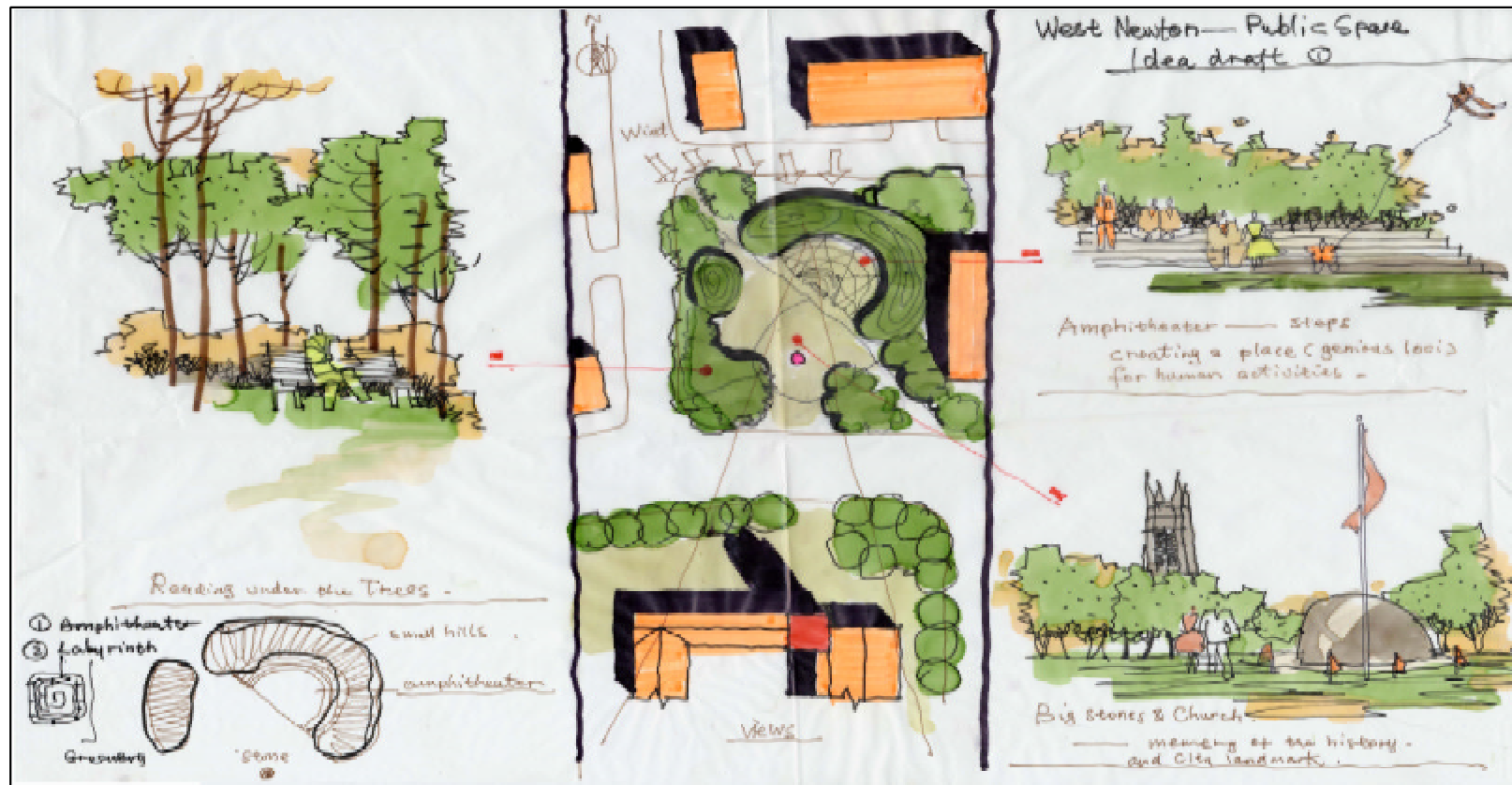
True to its name “the Garden City,” West Newton embodies Newton’s ideal of striking a balance between the built and natural environment, as described in detail previously. West Newton showcases an abundance of public parks, preservation areas, and greenspace. The inventory of greenspace along Washington Street, for example, includes Captain John Ryan Memorial Park, the First Unitarian Church grounds, plazas in front of the CVS store and Ben’s Café and street trees.

The existing wealth of greenspace could further be enhanced if:

1. Issues of landscape and street tree maintenance were addressed jointly by the City Planning Department and the Public Works Department;
2. Litter collection and yard waste removal were dealt with more frequently; and
3. Existing infrastructure, such as the garden outside Ben’s Coffeehouse, were developed to their full potential through creative landscaping practices.

Captain John Ryan Memorial Park is strategically located at the heart of the village center and contains a small yet impressive assembly of trees and extensive lawns. At the center of the park sits the trademark boulder inscribed with words of dedication to late Captain John Ryan. Some benches and a chess table carved of stone are placed near the outer rim of the park. The most prominent and functional feature is the set of diagonal paths that cut through the park. During the warmer months, the park offers refuge to office workers in the daytime and shelters weary pedestrians from the sun. In the autumn, the beautiful yellow of acacias and the flaming red of maples showcase an ever-changing theater of fall foliage. However, the general layout of the park at present offers little in terms of recreational opportunities. Its northeastern corner abutting the parking lot seems underutilized. In general, the park could be more welcoming to passers-by.

Given existing conditions in the park, the project team’s design proposal features a crescent-shaped mound of earth arching toward the northeast, with steps on its inner slopes leading down to a miniature amphitheater in the center. This takes

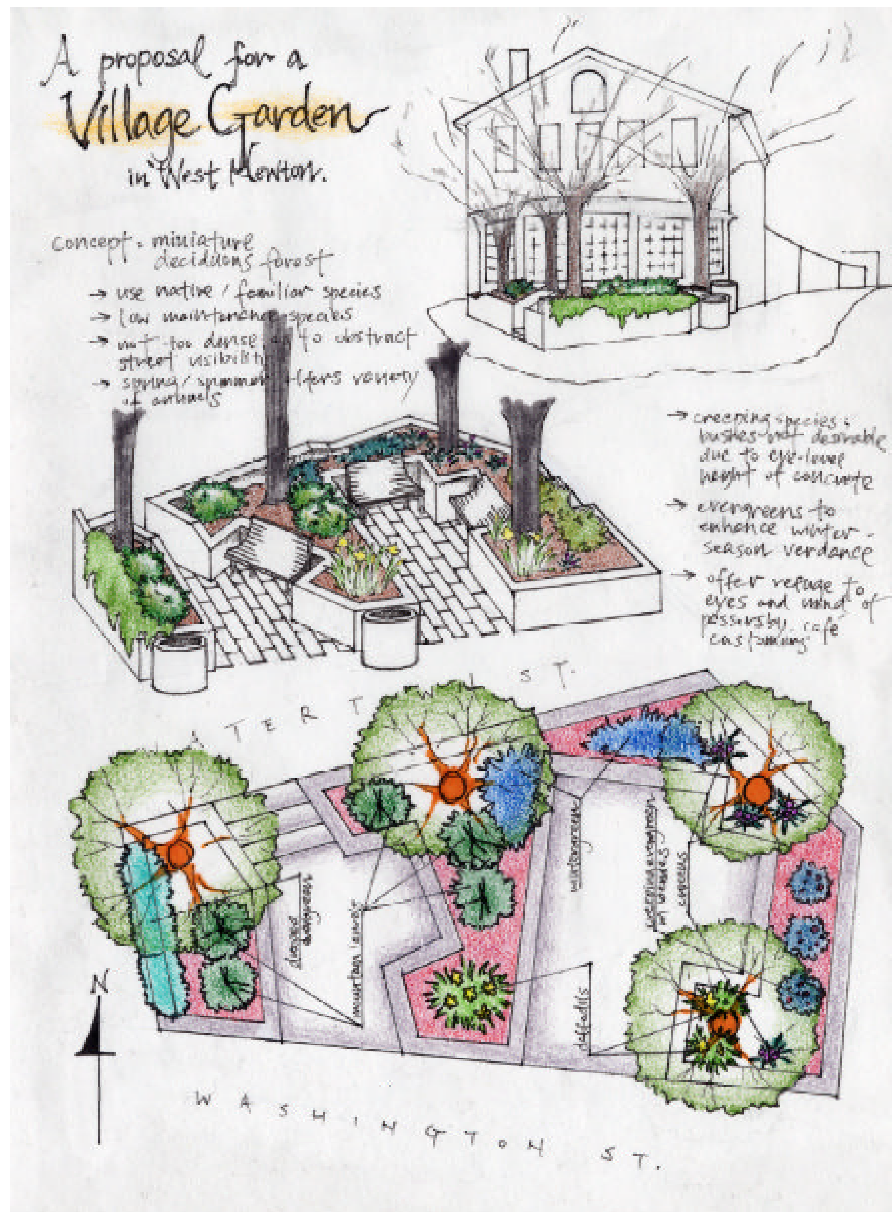


A proposal for renovation of Capt. John Ryan Memorial Park, featuring seating/steps cut into a small earthen berm.

advantage of existing physical features (the paths, the trees, and the boulder) and the existing topography. The crescent hill is made of packed earth and embellished at the surface with vegetative cover, which should be low-cost and produce negligible environmental impact. The crescent would function doubly as a shield against the wind and as a visual screen to conceal the sight of cars in the abutting parking lot. The crescent hill faces southwest looking out onto Washington Street, and would

create a view axis that helps orient people to the village center, and thereby create a sense of place. Overall, the design is elegant yet inexpensive to implement and it could conceivably be used to leverage CDBG funds.

There are also smaller tracts of existing greenspace along Washington Street that could potentially be transformed into floral beds and landscape gardens. Such tracts include the garden in front of Ben's



Coffehouse as well as the small, planted plazas in front of the CVS building at the corner of Washington and Waltham Streets. As illustrated in the accompanying design sketches, both tracts could be developed as “village gardens,” wherein landscaping maintenance and frequent gardening would greatly enhance the urban spaces surrounding it and further promote the village character.

D. Creating a Sense of Place and Enhancing the Village Character

All of the individual design elements noted above would have the effect of further enhancing the village character, thereby establishing a strong sense of place. A consistency in streetscape design would create focus; carefully chosen street lamps, benches and landscape details would drive home the fact that West Newton is a special place in the hearts of its residents and storeowners. In addition, appropriate signage demarcating West Newton boundaries would be instrumental in establishing where West Newton begins and ends.

The most crucial ingredient in establishing a sense of place in West Newton, however, is the human aspect of the built environment. A robust sense of community shared by homeowners, storekeepers and political representatives will no doubt contribute to a stronger sense of place. If each entity affecting the landscape could come to a larger consensus and act on behalf of a larger community - whether political or economic- then these collective efforts would make a difference over time.